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### Ben Jonson's Roman Soliloquies

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Roughly one third of the way through *Volpone*, his Venetian comedy, Ben Jonson finds the space for a scene unique in the play. It is the first scene in the third act, following a second act which has been largely concerned with the unfolding of Volpone's plan to undo the jealous husband Corvino's marriage. If the first act of the play undertakes the vital work of establishing not just the range of characters and the layout of their situation, but also the basic rhythm of their interactions, then the second act is where we see improvisation begin to inflect that rhythm. Act 2 scene 6 repeats the dynamics of Act 1 scene 5, in that Mosca acts upon Corvino and draws this gull towards his own undoing; it also develops his bespoke fate by working specifically on Corvino's jealous custody of his wife's honour, which was only suggested as a target for the tricksters' appropriative intentions at the very end of the earlier scene. On both occasions, it is Mosca who we see undertaking the work – and indeed, the plot against Corvino's jealousy is his suggestion, made to Volpone immediately after his encounter with the merchant in Act 1 scene 5.

There is, therefore, a degree of decorum in giving over the scene which begins the third act to a soliloquy by the parasite. It is, nevertheless, a striking moment, and something of a departure. It grants to Mosca a status that has hitherto only been enjoyed by the title character, in two brief asides as Voltore arrives in Act 1 scene 2, and a more substantial 20 line segment with which the first scene of the play concludes. Mosca's soliloquy at the beginning of Act 3 is a more substantial work – a full 33 lines, and a moment that pauses the bustle of the play. Nothing quite like it occurs again until the much briefer soliloquy with which Volpone opens the fifth act, at another lull in the action. Volpone's own soliloquies

are notably complementary. The first to some extent undertakes the function of a prologue (the actual Prologue having concerned itself with the defence both of Jonson and his drama), in setting out Volpone's animating drives, which are aligned with the drives of the plot itself. This exposition, though, is prefaced by an almost rhetorical question:

What should I do,  
But cocker up my genius and live free  
To all delights my fortune calls me to? (1.1.70-2)<sup>1</sup>

It is the invocation of freedom that is particularly noteworthy here; that, and the fact that living free is clarified as the indulgence or fostering ('cocker[ing] up') of 'genius'. This latter is a classically-derived term, of course, etymologically associated with the idea of an attendant spirit – but it here seems, *pace* the *OED*, used in the somewhat different sense of character or disposition.<sup>2</sup> There is a redoubling of self-disclosure, a moment of emphasised immediacy, in this articulation of his liberty. Unencumbered by external constraints on the drives of his genius, Volpone is free to become what he is. His subsequent soliloquy at the opening of Act 5 is interestingly complementary. 'Well, I am here', he begins, in another, even starker, moment of immediacy (5.1.1). Yet he also acknowledges now that his style has been somewhat cramped – he has felt the constraining grip of his pretended enfeeblement,

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<sup>1</sup> All quotations from Jonson's works are taken from Ben Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, ed. by David M. Bevington, Martin Butler, and Ian Donaldson, 7 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>2</sup> 'Genius, N. and Adj.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/77607>> [accessed 5 December 2016]. 'Cocker, v.1', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press) <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/35394>> [accessed 6 December 2016]. These lines from Volpone are there cited as examples of different usages

which has its affective component in the growth of his fears. The soliloquy dramatizes – via phatic ‘hums’ and ‘sos’ – the process by which he comes back to himself, through the external agency of a ‘bowl of lusty wine’ (5.1.11). Revived, he calls for Mosca and the action of the final act is set in train.

These soliloquies, then, frame Mosca’s own moment alone on stage at the opening of Act 3. And like his boss, he takes the opportunity to present himself as the self-fulfilment of his own genius. His opening lines stress this process of actualisation, as he speaks of ‘begin[ning] to grow in love / with my dear self’, and the way in which his ‘most prosperous parts ... do so spring and burgeon’ (3.1.1-3). The rest of the soliloquy is a hymn to the art of the parasite. While parasitism is universal, Mosca says, the ‘fine, elegant rascal’ (3.1.23) is, in fact, a genius – in something like the later sense of the word:

This is the creature had the art born with him;  
Toils not to learn it, but doth practise it  
Out of most excellent nature; and such sparks  
Are the true parasites, others but their zanies. (3.1.30-33)

‘True parasites’, therefore, are those who give rein to their nature, whose art expresses or fulfils their potential. The terms of praise here are for the skill and felicity of the true parasite, and are therefore primarily framed in aesthetic terms – yet there is also a degree of rapturous sublimity to it, as the nimble rascal demonstrates the capacity to

be here,  
And there, and her, and yonder, all at once;

Present to any humour, all occasion;

And change a visor swifter than a thought! (3.1.27-30)

The true parasite, in other words, is not just a skilled operator but a kind of magical presence – ubiquitously here, wherever here turns out to be.

What is especially interesting about this little trio of soliloquies – and my reason for starting an essay on Jonson’s Roman plays with a look at his Venetian satire – is the way in which content and form are aligned. Each soliloquy is to a fundamental extent deictic: Volpone and Mosca variously stress their immediacy, their presence to the moment and in the speeches they’re making. Each is also, connectedly, declarative: Volpone is not just deictically here, but demonstrates this in saying, baldly, literally, ‘I am here’. And what both the central figures declare, *here*, is their genius, their basic drives, capability and essence. In being declaratively here, they are completely so – and this is the substance of their freedom, conceived both positively (as flourishing) and negatively (as the absence of constraint). That all this should crowd into the rare space of a soliloquy, and happen nowhere else in a play built out of serial deceptions and disguisings, is hardly coincidental. This, in *Volpone*, is what the soliloquy does. What does it tell us about Jonson’s playwriting that this should be so?

Most importantly, I think, it demonstrates the Jonsonian insistence on what I have elsewhere called ‘infradrama’, the deictic insistence on the spatiotemporal moment of performance.<sup>3</sup> Jonson is rightly known for his extensive and inventive use of what is usually

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<sup>3</sup> James Loxley and Mark Robson, *Shakespeare, Jonson, and the Claims of the Performative*, Routledge Studies in Renaissance Literature and Culture (New York, N.J. London: Routledge, 2013), p.124.

termed metadrama, the self-conscious staging of the frames within which drama is generated. This is evident not only in the deployment of such familiar elements as plays-within-the-play, but more prominently in the use of frame-staging elements such as the Induction of *Bartholomew Fair*, the choric ‘gossips’ of *The Staple of News*, or the authorial ‘apologetical dialogue’ appended to *Poetaster*. To some extent, Jonson’s use of metadramatic effects has been understood as a component part in a strategy of ‘disillusionment’, pointing up the extent to which dramatic performance is just the confection of illusions. Indeed, it has even been thought to be of a piece with the anti-theatricality of which he has been accused.<sup>4</sup> Yet to read such moments as infradramatic is to suggest instead an emphasis on the *solidity* of what is presented in performance, that it is manifest before us. This is not an invitation to see *through* the show but to acknowledge, through its deictic self-insistence, its happening in the here and now.

Thus, the soliloquies of *Volpone* have the function of confronting us with the haecceity, as it were, of the actor-character in front of us – that he, in and of himself, is here before us. This kind of soliloquy is not about crafting an appearance of psychological complexity, nor any of the more instrumental functions set out in Wolfgang Clemen’s classic account of this dramatic resource.<sup>5</sup> Neither is it about stressing any kind of disjunction or disparity between performance and what is performed. It is, rather, a moment of theatrical self-presentation of the sort discussed in detail by Bridget Escolme, in which the fact of performance is openly acknowledged in the articulation of persona.<sup>6</sup> It is notable, in this context, that what constitutes the genius of both *Volpone* and *Mosca*, on which they dwell

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<sup>4</sup> Loxley and Robson, 117-23.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Clemen, *Shakespeare’s Soliloquies* (London: Routledge, 1990), p.4.

<sup>6</sup> Bridget Escolme, *Talking to the Audience: Shakespeare, Performance, Self* (London: Routledge, 2005), 1-24.

in their addresses to their audience, is an *art* – in Mosca’s case, the art of playing itself. As so often, and perhaps contrary to the expectations of some, Jonson relies confidently on the specifically performative force of theatre to anchor his drama.

When *Volpone* was first published in quarto in 1607, it was prefaced by a ‘Dedicatory Epistle’ which echoed the play’s prologue in addressing some of the kinds of censure to which its author feared he might be subject. In particular, he there addressed the ever-present possibility that his plays might be maliciously misinterpreted or misconstrued, either on the page or in performance. This epistle, though, is not solely concerned with the play it prefaces. Indeed, in certain of its phrasings it echoes letters that Jonson had penned from prison to several possible intercessors in 1605, when his shared responsibility for *Eastward Ho!* had provoked royal displeasure. There, too, he concerned himself with the possibility of misprision, attempting to exculpate himself through the claim that his words had been misinterpreted by those who had denounced him. There is also a formal and thematic continuity between the epistle, the prison letters, and the ‘Apologetical Dialogue’ accompanying his Roman satire, *Poetaster*, a play which was first performed in 1601 and published in quarto the following year. And the concern with this kind of vulnerability is just as evident in *Sejanus*, the Roman tragedy which Jonson wrote, initially collaboratively, for performance in 1603, as critics and editors – most notably Tom Cain – have stressed.<sup>7</sup> Both *Poetaster* and *Sejanus* are not just Roman but classicist: while the former brings to life an Augustan Rome inhabited by Ovid, Horace and Virgil as well as Caesar and Maecenas, the latter looks to the *Annals* of Tacitus for the bulk of its source matter. Both plays, too, are

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<sup>7</sup> Tom Cain, “‘Satyres, That Girde and Fart at the Time’: *Poetaster* and the Essex Rebellion”, in *Refashioning Ben Jonson*, ed. by Julie Sanders, Kate Chedgzoy, and Susan Wiseman (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1998), pp. 48–70, ‘Introduction’ to *Sejanus His Fall*, in Jonson, *Works*, vol. 2, pp. 197–209.

inflected by the classical scholarship of Jonson's mentors and contemporaries. Marlowe's translation of Ovid's *Elegy* 1.15, for example, is cited in a lightly adapted form in Act 1 scene 1 of *Poetaster*, and George Chapman's *Ovid's Banquet of Sense* informs episodes dramatized in Act 4. Its most recent editor suggests that the play 'draws from over seventy writers, about half English and half Greek and Latin.'<sup>8</sup> Jonson's use of Tacitus for *Sejanus* was mediated both by Justus Lipsius's prior editorial work and Richard Greneway's translation of the *Annals*, despite Jonson's professed low opinion of the latter.<sup>9</sup> He even clarified his use of contemporary scholarly sources in the address 'To the Readers' prefixed to the quarto edition of 1605, elaborating on the marginal references which accompany the playtext throughout:

It may be required, since I have quoted the page, to name what editions I followed. Tacitus, Lipsius in 4<sup>o</sup>, Antwerp edition, 1600. Dio Cassius, folio, Henricus Stephanus, 1592. For the rest, as Suetonius, Seneca, etc., the chapter doth sufficiently direct, or the edition is not varied. ('To the Readers', ll. 27-30)

Such broadcast participation in the classical scholarship central to Renaissance humanism should also be read as a contribution to contemporary concerns, rather than their avoidance. *Poetaster*'s own satiric exploration of the place of poetry in public life came in the wake of the Bishops' Ban of 1599, and during the traumatic fallout from the Earl of Essex's rising in February 1601. The edition of Marlowe's Ovid that Jonson cited in *Poetaster*

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriele Bernhard Jackson, 'Introduction' to *Poetaster, or His Arraignment*, in Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson.*, vol. 2, p.10.

<sup>9</sup> Ben Jonson, *Sejanus His Fall*, ed. by Philip Ayres (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp.12-16.



had been publicly burnt during the crackdown on non-dramatic satire, while Tacitean history was of particular relevance to the political critique offered by Essex and his supporters.<sup>10</sup> What's more, Jonson had significant connections to a number of Essex's followers and sympathisers, and his thematic concerns in both plays find ample echoes in the critique of the corruptions of late Elizabethan rule developed and articulated by his faction.<sup>11</sup> And both Roman plays were subsequently afflicted by the very dangers presented by and to public utterance with which they are thematically suffused. *Poetaster's* 'Apologetical Dialogue' had an awkward history – it 'was only once spoken upon the stage', in defence of Jonson against 'sundry impotent libels then cast out (and some yet remaining) against me and this play' ('To the Reader', ll. 3-4), and Jonson was 'restrain'd ... by Authoritie' from including it in the 1602 quarto, leaving only a note to the reader to mark its absence; it was finally included, with another explanatory note, in the folio of 1616.<sup>12</sup> His Roman tragedy caused Jonson a related kind of difficulty. As he related to William Drummond in 1618-19, 'he was called before the [Privy] Council for his *Sejanus*, and accused both of popery and treason by him' (*Informations*, ll. 251-2). There is some doubt over whether it was the 1603 performance or the 1605 quarto which provoked the summons; given that these acts are included in a cumulative list of evidence for the Earl of Northampton's hostility to Jonson, and that the prose of the *Informations* is often elliptical, there is even room to wonder whether the accusations of 'popery and treason' were directly related to Northampton's suspicions regarding the play, or came at another point in

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<sup>10</sup> Blair Worden, 'Ben Jonson among the Historians', in *Culture and Politics in Early Stuart England*, by Peter Lake and Kevin Sharpe (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1994), pp. 67–90.

<sup>11</sup> In addition to Worden, see Cain, 'Satyres' and Ian Donaldson, *Ben Jonson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>12</sup> Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 2, p.168.

their enmity.<sup>13</sup> But if Cain's reasoning is accepted, then it was the quarto edition, published just after November 5 1605, that got Jonson into trouble with the Privy Council.<sup>14</sup> In which case, the elaborate classical apparatus flagging up the play's debt to Tacitus would have served not to distance it from contemporary concerns but further to implicate it in them. While the story of Sejanus would not work readily as an allegory or roman-à-clef for the early years of James's English reign, its generic usefulness for those – like the gunpowder plotters – seeking to associate a monarchical regime with corruption would have made Jonson's retelling at least a potential object of suspicion.

What, then, of the Rome evoked in *Poetaster* and *Sejanus*? It is, on both occasions, an imperial setting – the era of Augustus, in the first, then that of his successor, Tiberius, in the second. Standardly, Augustan Rome was portrayed as a thriving polity, overseen by an uncorrupted ruler whose chief object was the service of the state. By contrast, the Rome of Tiberius was famed as a place of plots and the subservience of the public interest to the pursuit of private ends by the powerful and unscrupulous. Sejanus, Tiberius's over-reaching favourite, was the epitome of this mode of misrule. In the Augustan Rome of *Poetaster*, what keeps everything in its proper place is the emperor's own judgement and good sense in upholding the conditions for political and social honesty. Tiberian Rome, however, is a place where the imperial power is at its most effective in its occlusions and its hypocrisies, where the processes of government and judgment are dominated by an emperor and his favourite whose malign ends require perpetual public dissimulation. Both cities, though, are alike populated by the just and unjust. Where Augustan Rome has Maecenas, Virgil and

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<sup>13</sup> See the discussion by Tom Cain in Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 2, p. 201.

<sup>14</sup> Jonson, *The Cambridge Edition of the Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 2, p. 201-2.

Horace, it also contains the rather less high-minded Tucca, a braggart soldier, Asinius Lupus, a 'turbulent informer' (5.3.13), and – most pointedly – the aspiring poetaster Crispinus and hack writer Demetrius Fannius. These latter figures are key to a plot to accuse Horace, in particular, of treason, a plot which hinges on the malicious misreading of one of his manuscripts, 'the imperfect body of an emblem ... I began for Maecenas', as Horace explains to Augustus (5.3.45-6). Tiberian Rome, meanwhile, revolves around the machinations of the emperor himself, his favourite, and vehicles like the prefect Macro, also giving space and voice to spies and informers such as Latiaris and the orator Afer. Yet the play also gives prominence to a group of citizens whose appalled reactions to the corruption around them punctuates the action. Lepidus and Arruntius manage to outlive Sejanus's purge of likeminded opponents, which takes out such allies as Silius, Sabinus and the historian Cremutius Cordus. There is, then, a degree of consistency within the social and political ecologies of the two plays, even if there are stark differences of emphasis and tone which allow the earlier to be defined as comic and the later play as tragic. In *Poetaster*, the attempted assault on Horace is reversed into an arraignment of Crispinus, in which he is accused of the very crime of libel – 'deprav[ing] and calumniat[ing]' – which he and his crew had attempted to fix on the innocent Horace (5.3.189). He is punished and purged, in a working out of Augustan poetic justice. In *Sejanus*, by contrast, the fall of the erstwhile favourite sets nothing to rights. Tiberius remains untouched and in place; justice is occluded entirely by Fortune, whose eerie presence has grown more pervasive in the fifth act. As Lepidus says:

How Fortune plies her sports, when she begins

To practise 'em! Pursues, continues, adds!

Confounds, with varying her impassioned moods! (5.870-72)

There is no suggestion that this chaotic process is at all to be arrested through Sejanus's own downfall; indeed, as Nuntius has reported, the populace are now grieving for the man they have just torn limb from limb. The concluding speech from Terentius, meanwhile, merely rehearses the commonplace notion of the futility of human over-reaching.

But the differences between the two Romes are not simply those attributable to the requirements or characteristics of genre. In *Poetaster*, there is an unsurprising focus on the place of poetry in the polity governed by Augustus. This is most clearly worked out in the developed contrast between Horace and Crispinus, and given its fullest exposition in Act 3 scene 1, a dramatization of Horace's *Satires* I.9. Here we see that the distinction between poet and poetaster is not simply one of talent, but also an ethical contrast. Crispinus asks for Horace's help in gaining the patronage of Maecenas, and promises in return then to work on their patron to manoeuvre rivals such as Virgil out of his favour. Yet this, as Horace now cannot help but forcefully point out, is to mistake the nature of Maecenas's patronage, and thus the place of poetry within the moral and social economy of Rome:

Sir, your Silkness

Clearly mistakes Maecenas and his house,  
To think there breathes a spirit beneath his roof  
Subject unto those poor affections  
Of undermining envy and detraction –  
Moods only proper to base, grovelling minds.  
That place is not in Rome, I dare affirm,

More pure or free from such low, common evils.  
There's no man grieved that this is thought more rich  
Or this more learned; each man hath his place,  
And to his merit his reward of grace,  
Which with a mutual love they all embrace. (3.1.206-17)

The picture of social and cultural relations painted here is met with incredulity by Crispinus, but is borne out in the portrayal of Caesar's court in Act 5. This, too, is a space free of 'envy and detraction', as Horace dramatically demonstrates when Caesar requests his opinion of Virgil while asserting that he, not being wealthy, 'is likeliest to envy or to detract' (5.1.78). To this Horace responds with an assertion of his freedom:

And for my soul, it is as free as Caesar's,  
For what I know is due I'll give to all.  
He that detracts or envies virtuous merit  
Is still the covetous and the ignorant spirit. (5.1.91-4)

The freedom claimed here is multiple: the freedom from corruption by wealth granted by knowledge, and the freedom to speak openly and clearly. As the latter, it is claimed in being demonstrated, but it depends for its truth on Caesar's response. This, of course, is all that Horace could have hoped for – his 'free and wholesome sharpness', which some might have taken as impudence, is instead welcomed by a monarch who asserts that 'a flattered prince soon turns the prince of fools' (5.1.94, 96). Caesar, then, proves worthy of the praise and fidelity of poets such as Horace and his laureate, Virgil. The distinction between them and

such poetasters as Crispinus lies therefore in their embodiment, in their art, of this capacity to speak out, and the capacity of their masters to recognise this as a virtue.

Yet the play complicates this picture in its inclusion of Ovid. His narrative begins the play, but this is a stark piece of misdirection on Jonson's part. Indeed, he is completely excluded from the idealised literary and critical exchanges organised around Caesar and Maecenas, but at the same time he confounds the mutual definition of poet and poetaster that the play sets up through the interactions of Horace and Crispinus. This position is established in the very first scene of the play, where Ovid recites a revision of Marlowe's translation of *Elegy* 1.15. It begins with an address to 'Envy' – a personification of which is a striking presence in the play's Induction – and it goes on to mount a strong defence of poetry as something rather more elevated than the 'fruits of an idle quill' (1.1.38). Indeed, the poem develops into a full-blown panegyric of poetry's divine capabilities:

But heavenly poesy no death can fear.  
Kings shall give place to it, and kingly shows,  
The banks o'er which gold-bearing Tagus flows.  
Kneel hinds to trash; me let bright Phoebus swell  
With cups full flowing from the muses' well...  
Then, when this body falls in funeral fire,  
My name shall live, and my best part aspire. (1.1.68-72, 77-8)

But this concluding line is immediately followed by a response from Ovid Senior, entering just in time to overhear it and suggest that his son will only achieve infamy for preferring to be a 'play-maker' than a 'pleader' (1.2.7). The antagonism between father and son over the

merits of poetry complements the Horace-Crispinus dynamic, and is later interwoven with the narrative of Ovid's love for Julia, and Augustus' hostile response to the playful banquet of Act 4. There, the emperor's banishment of Ovid and the consequent termination of his relationship with Julia seems to align him with the poet's hostile father. But Augustus is not hostile to poetry, as Ovid Senior is. Quite the opposite – his complaint is that Ovid and his fellows have profaned both poetry and the gods in treating them with such a lack of seriousness. Ovid's reverence for his art is met with a harsher insistence on its virtues and the sacrilege done by treating them lightly. So the play moves, via a balcony scene in which the parting of Ovid and Julia is dramatized, towards its second scene of recitation. Here Virgil is entreated by Caesar to read from his *Aeneid*, in the company of Maecenas, Horace, Tibullus and Gallus – the latter two summarily pardoned by the emperor for their participation in Ovid's banquet, unlike Ovid himself. As if to point up the contrast with the earlier recitation, the section read by Virgil is the characterisation of 'Rumour' or ill fame from Book 4, customarily paired – not least by Jonson – with envy.

There is some debate around the play's treatment of Ovid. The court from which he complains of being banished is not quite the same as the Augustan centre subsequently portrayed, a place in which the social and moral functions of poetry are uncompromisingly stressed and upheld. Clearly, *Poetaster* is setting this serious vision of a public and accountable poetry over and above the more amorous and playful poetics hymned and practised by Ovid. But in the absence of any significant modern stage history, it is hard to assess the tone of the play's handling of him. Warren Chernaik suggests that he is 'presented as both a true poet and a voluptuary', while Victoria Moul claims that the parting of Julia and Ovid is a 'burlesque farewell scene', making Ovid another focus of Jonson's

explicitly satiric attention.<sup>15</sup> Yet as Moul also notes, the evocation of Ovid is explicitly Marlovian not only in his borrowing of Marlowe's translation of *Elegy* 1.15 but also in its intertextual relationship with *Dido, Queen of Carthage*.<sup>16</sup> This is to invest it with a degree of grandeur which would be at odds with mere burlesque, suggesting a rather more nuanced or ambivalent approach.

There is further evidence for this in the dramatic structuring of the role. *Poetaster* is a play sparse in its use of soliloquy, and yet all four of the moments that could meaningfully be classified as such are given to Ovid. The first is the recitation that concludes Act 1 scene 1; the second is a meditation with which the subsequent scene ends; his response to his banishment constitutes the third, immediately prior to his parting scene with Julia, while the fourth is the briefest, a concluding comment following Julia's departure. By contrast, Horace has only two significant asides, according to modern editors, both occurring in Act 3 scene 1, the dramatized rendering of his *Satire*. Ovid's soliloquies, what's more, are rendered more emphatic by their locations in the play. Act 1 scene 1 actually opens with Ovid alone, composing the final lines of his elegy, before he is interrupted by the garrulous family servant, Luscus – the recitation that follows the servant's departure is thus signalled and deferred before finally unfolding before us. While his father's entry at the transition to scene 2 overlaps with the end of this speech, Ovid is not actually interrupted – as Virgil is in Act 5 – in mid-flow: he is permitted to complete the poem before his father intervenes. The soliloquy that concludes scene 2 returns Ovid to verse in the aftermath of his father's departure, thus allowing him a concluding and seemingly extempore recapitulation of the

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<sup>15</sup> Victoria Moul, *Jonson, Horace and the Classical Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p.139; Warren Chernaik, *The Myth of Rome in Shakespeare and His Contemporaries* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 109.

<sup>16</sup> Moul, 160-1.



praise of poetry offered in his earlier moment *solus*. In Act 4 scene 8, Ovid's reflections on his banishment from the court, and from Julia's presence, punctuate the unfolding plot against Horace, and preface his actual encounter with Julia in the following scene. That his final moments in the play again take place in soliloquy should perhaps come as no surprise.

What should we make of this? The stylistic parameters for Ovid's soliloquies are established by his initial recitation, and the three subsequent instances conform themselves broadly to its lexical and rhetorical patterns. This voice is distinctive enough without it also being given a monopoly on the opportunities for direct address that Jonson affords his excluded poet. The effect, broadly, is to offer something of a counterweight to the plot's marginalisation of an Ovidian view: the immediacy of Ovid's self-presentation to an audience otherwise deprived of direct interactions with *Poetaster's* actor-characters might well function to establish the force of this affect-laden articulation of poetry's powers as an alternative mode of free speaking, taking full advantage of the infradramatic potential of the soliloquy itself. As in *Volpone*, here again an art speaks in the articulation of the truth of a self – and these are an art and self that sit in an oblique relation to the free speech emphatically endorsed in the Augustanism to which both Horace and Virgil are seemingly content to conform themselves. The deployment of the soliloquy as a distinctively Ovidian dramatic resource here makes that expressive vision an element in a more multivocal play than might otherwise be expected. If Act 5 of *Poetaster* sees the purgation of poet-apes, the unreconciled absence of an affectively forceful Ovid lingers to complicate the play's vision of poetic liberty.

The care and craft with which Jonson deploys the resource of the soliloquy in his Roman satire is matched in his subsequent tragedy, even if the deployment there is radically different. Once again, we have a play concerned with the politics of language, though now

the focus is not primarily on the place of poetry in an imperial frame. Instead, *Sejanus* broadens the picture to take in the writing of history and the practice of rhetoric. And while Augustan Rome was a place in which speaking freely was prized by emperor, patrons and true poets, Tiberian Rome is instead a place where such behaviour is entirely without force. The Germanicans who hymn freedom of speech as a component in a set of republican liberties now thoroughly occluded, as Silius and Arruntius do towards the end of Act 1 (1.400-38), conduct themselves for the most part in a series of exchanges intended to be unheard by those on whom they pass judgement. Such a liberty is a freedom to speak honestly, and this is not a prudent course of action in this polity. For one thing, there is a pervasive network of spies and informers ready to pounce on any hint of distrust or scepticism regarding the emperor or his favourite. Those whose words can be read or misread against them, like the historian Cremutius Cordus, are destroyed, or – like Silius – destroy themselves. By far the most outspoken of the opponents of Sejanus and Tiberius is Arruntius, who offers plentiful acerbic or combative comments on proceedings which have perhaps too often been marked as asides by modern editors.<sup>17</sup> However, his interventions are no more forceful in affecting the course of the play than the greater reticence of his fellows. As a number of critics have suggested, he is to some extent an allowed fool – left untouched despite his hostility, both because he presents no real danger and because his continued presence in public Rome gives the closed regime the appearance of openness.

By contrast, the kind of speech that works here is thoroughly unfree, in the sense of being opaque or necessarily dishonest. Public discourse is entirely corrupt. Whereas

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<sup>17</sup> Penelope Geng, “‘He Only Talks’: Arruntius and the Formation of Interpretive Communities in Ben Jonson’s *Sejanus*”, *Ben Jonson Journal*, 18.1 (2011), 126–40 (pp. 131–4) <<https://doi.org/10.3366/bjj.2011.0011>>.

Augustus could say, in *Poetaster*, that ‘wholesome sharpness’ in speech pleased him more than the flattery of ‘servile fawns’ (5.1.94-5), and be taken at his word, Tiberius’s similar declared disapprobation for flattery at his very first entrance (1.374-5) is not to be trusted – as everyone in the play, including Tiberius, already knows only too well. It is not so much that the politic powers of language operate without reference either to inner or outer truths, but that it is understood – if usually only implicitly – that utterances are occlusive of the drives they serve and the ends they seek. Simply speaking your mind in such an economy is either impotence or suicide, sometimes both. Thus, too, all readings become suspicious, a condition dramatized in the way that Jonson brings incommensurable groups of speakers and hearers on the stage simultaneously to speak apart from, and pass comment and judgement on, each other.

How, then, does the soliloquy fit in to this picture? Given its later use in *Volpone* as an infradramatic moment of freedom, and its alignment with the expressive passion of Ovid in *Poetaster*, what does Jonson do with it here? He is certainly more generous and flexible with it than in either the earlier or later play, and clearly alert too to the particular possibilities created by its use within his dramatization of discursive opacity and indirection. There is initially an association of Sejanus with the soliloquy: the earliest instance of someone speaking alone is a short speech by Sejanus in the middle of Act 1, immediately prior to Tiberius’s first entrance, in which he appears to speak directly and honestly about his own plots and plans, even referring to himself in the third person (1.370). This moment of apparent transparency is repeated at the end of Act 1, with Sejanus again remaining on stage alone for three rhymed couplets of declarative speech in which he explicitly says that he is concealing his true motivations the better to pursue them:

Wrath, covered, carries fate:

Revenge is lost, if I profess my hate. (1.578-9)

Early in Act 2, however, we witness a rather more expansive moment of self-display from Sejanus. He does not now confine himself to direct statement of his plans, as if his turn to the audience were solely functional. Instead, a note of the pleasure taken in the execution of his talents enters into a soliloquy which remains declarative but becomes increasingly hyperbolic:

Adultery? It is the lightest ill

I will commit. A race of wicked acts

Shall flow out of my anger and o'erspread

The world's wide face, which posterity

Shall e'er approve, nor yet keep silent. (2.150-4)

Given the affective intensity of this speech, it is perhaps no surprise that Greg Doran's 2005 production of the play chose to have Sejanus utter it while raping his slave.<sup>18</sup> There is undoubtedly something here of the infradramatic force of a performative power speaking itself that we see rather less melodramatically unleashed in *Volpone*. And such a moment

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<sup>18</sup> Lois Potter, 'Politic Tyrants: The 2005 Jacobean Season at the Swan', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 57.4 (2006), 450–62; Kristen McDermott, review of *Review of Sejanus: His Fall, Sir Thomas More*, by Ben Jonson and others, *Theatre Journal*, 58.1 (2006), 127–31.

contributes markedly to what Sean McEvoy calls 'one of the revelations' of Doran's production, 'the discovery of the ferocious sensual energy of Sejanus'.<sup>19</sup>

Such a moment is repeated, in a slightly more restrained fashion, around 200 lines later. But having established this pattern, the play then begins a more complex work with the soliloquy which brings its operation more into line with the generalised condition of discursive opacity that pervades the rest of the play. The shift is strikingly conveyed in a sequence of three soliloquies which follow swiftly on each other towards the end of the third act. The cagey exchange between Sejanus and Tiberius in which the former first asks for permission to marry Livia, then withdraws his request in the face of the emperor's demurral, is followed by a soliloquy from the favourite in which he passes a harsh judgement on 'dull, heavy Caesar' (3.586) in comparison with his own qualities. The dramaturgical shift is indicated, though, in the fact that Sejanus's exit is immediately followed by Tiberius's re-entry onto the stage, and his address to the audience with a fatal soliloquy of his own which sandwiches an exchange with his slave. Having begun to plot Sejanus's fall with his willing instrument Macro, Tiberius departs – but Macro remains on stage to deliver a lengthy soliloquy of his own. So the play decentres and ironises Sejanus's infradramatic self-dramatisation by overlaying it with two further moments of direct address that serve to diminish its immediacy. When a soliloquising Sejanus is next presented, at the outset of Act 5, his attempt at self-proclamation fails precisely because it is rendered dramatic rather than infradramatic, subjected to a dramatic irony exercised through his inability to monopolise the device of the soliloquy:

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<sup>19</sup> Sean McEvoy, *Ben Jonson, Renaissance Dramatist* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 37.

Swell, swell, my joys, and faint not to declare  
Yourselves as ample as your causes are.  
I did not live till now, this my first hour,  
Wherein I see my thoughts reached by my power. (5.1-4)

In fact, as we know, the opposite is the case: his fall is imminent and unavoidable. He acts as if only he could speak his truth in this fashion, as if in speaking it would be true, as if his was an effective art – but this is no longer a confidence we are able to share. He, too, has fallen victim to the opacity of the discourse of those who are actively seeking to exercise their own drives. His final soliloquy is in an entirely different register, recalling past deeds redolent of his own possession of this capacity, but now anticipating his demise. Meanwhile, the audience comes into alignment with a Germanican position: undeceived by virtue of our inactivity, and helpless to intervene. The dethronement of the capacity for infradramatic self-realisation claimed by Sejanus is signalled, now, by the uncanny presence of Fortune and her own portentous but opaque and inhuman communications. True agency, it seems, resides not in the expressive performance of human drives, but in the workings of an inscrutable and unknowable force which is entirely alien to them.

Jonson's self-conscious classicism has sometimes been thought to be at odds with his dramaturgical skill, as if he were only – absurdly – a reluctant dramatist. In a related pattern, his printed plays have been thought to show a preference for the activity of reading over the power of performance. This picture has rightly come in for some trenchant

criticism in recent years.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, as his multifaceted use of the quintessentially dramatic device of the soliloquy in *Poetaster* and *Sejanus* shows, a profound fascination with a range of classical exemplars and sources, and with how such an inheritance might best be assumed in different historical and cultural conditions, is instead entirely compatible with an effort to make manifest the singularly dramatic freedom of a theatrical here and now.

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<sup>20</sup> Holger Schott Syme, ‘Unediting the Margin: Jonson, Marston, and the Theatrical Page’, *English Literary Renaissance*, 38.1 (2008), 142–71 <<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-6757.2008.00120.x>>.

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